

An Icon 'for such a time as this'

Once again, Julian of Norwich is relevant 'for such a time as this'. (Esther 4.14) and, as a Companion of Julian of Norwich, I find she is a great comfort.

Mother Julian lived through three waves of the Black Death, in 14th century Norwich. She knew people who died. She may have lost some people very close to her and mourned them - perhaps at a distance, unable to attend their funeral.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many people to self-isolate. Julian knew, by vocation, obedience and choice, what it is like to live isolated from others. She may have had access to a small enclosed garden, but we don't really know. Those of us with gardens can get some fresh air and see nature growing, but that is less easy if you live in an apartment or high-rise flat. The solitary, limited, enclosed life has become a reality for many this year, with no choice in the matter.

Today we can keep in touch via e-mails, texts, Facebook, What's App, Skype, FaceTime, phone calls, post, etc. Julian had none of these in the 14th century. Her social contact was limited by her vocation as an anchoress. However, she had limited contact with her priest, spiritual director, servants and with the many people who came to her for spiritual counsel. But she didn't see this last group – there would probably have been a heavy curtain at her open window when she listened to them and talked to them.

Julian could hear the Daily Offices and Mass through the window of her anchor-hold which opened into the church. But she was not physically *in* the church with others. We may be limited in our attendance at church but have opportunities to join with others on-line via prayer and worship websites. Some churches offer their own services via Facebook. Julian may not have physically taken the consecrated elements at Mass very often and it would have been 'in one kind only', the consecrated bread. Often she would have heard Mass by watching through her window and made a 'spiritual communion', just as many of us are learning to do.

For many Christians the contemplative life is a reality – a response to the call of God. Whether that is as a solitary or in the more social context of living with a partner, in a family or with a friend, we know our need of God, we respond to the call to prayer and intercession. This is surely a call to all of us at this time.

Julian would have eaten a simple diet, and lived without most of the luxuries we take for granted: I expect mediaeval toilet paper was non-existent! Like her, we can appreciate what we do have, live more simply and with gratitude.

The Black Death spread differently from *Covid-19*, and we now know much more about hygiene and infection control, medical and scientific research, epidemiological mapping and vaccines. But we seem to be as susceptible to panic, fear, despair, selfishness and believing misinformation and 'fake news' as our mediaeval sisters and brothers were. The media is two-edged - a good way to disseminate helpful advice and information but also capable of whipping things out of proportion and worrying people. We are also seeing the best is being brought out in people in wonderful instances of love, care and self-sacrifice and community awareness. We should all follow the official advice we are given to stay as safe as we can. But perhaps we can follow Julian by filling time with thoughts of the love of God rather than being lead off-track by the media circus.

All that Julian experienced led her to write her wonderful *Revelations of Divine Love*, so full of insight and reflection. The God she shows us in the suffering and compassionate Jesus is the same God for us. "He did not say, 'You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted.' But he said 'You shall not be overcome'. God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy." (RDL Ch 68)

Mother Julian of Norwich – pray for us.